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August 03, 2022 06:46 PM | AN HOUR AGO

# Officials shut Wixom plant after chemical release, assess contamination at water treatment plant

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REPRINTS



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Michigan health and environmental authorities on Tuesday issued a warning to residents about the release of a harmful liquid into the Huron River by an automotive supplier with a history of contaminating the waterway.

Officials have shut down an automotive supply plant in Wixom responsible for releasing cancer-causing chemicals into the Huron River as they assess the extent of contamination and how it might have affected a local water treatment plant.



Meanwhile, questions linger over how the contamination happened and why the public was not notified sooner.

The city of Wixom issued a cease-and-desist order to the company Monday after learning about the contamination, said City Manager Steve Brown. He said the company's Plant 5, at 48668 Alpha Drive, remains shut down.

"We took action to stop their discharge and divert it to holding tanks," Brown said. "The bad news for Wixom is it's now contaminated our treatment plant to some extent. The good news side of it is that it helped to reduce the quantity of the discharge (to the Huron River)."

Brown said the contamination did not impact drinking water. Officials recommend all people and pets avoid contact with the Huron River between North Wixom Road in Oakland County and Kensington Road in Livingston County including Norton Creek downstream of the Wixom Wastewater Treatment Plant, Hubbell Pond (Mill Pond) and Kent Lake.



Steve Brown

The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy said in the initial news release Tuesday that the company notified the department of the contamination at 3:21 p.m. Monday. The contamination could have started as early as Saturday, the company told EGLE.

EGLE said Wednesday that officials have met with the company and inspected the plant.

"One goal is to better define the volume/amount of liquid containing 5% hexavalent chromium that was discharged to the sanitary sewer system from Tribar over the weekend and routed to the Wixom wastewater treatment facility," the department said in a news release.

At the same time, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services launched a hotline (800-648-6942) for residents with questions or concerns about exposure. The chemical can cause harm through ingestion, skin contact or inhalation.

Brown said after ordering the company to cease operations Monday, it sent police officers to question plant operators about how the contamination happened. The operators declined to speak without an attorney, Brown said, and the city was notified shortly after that the Michigan Department of Natural Resources would be taking over the investigation.

EGLE officials were not available for an interview Wednesday.

Tribar, which supplies decorative trim and badge assemblies to the automotive industry, could not be reached for comment.

Amy McMillan, director of Huron-Clinton Metroparks, said the park system shut down the beaches and boat rentals at Kensington Metropark after being notified of the contamination through EGLE's media release Tuesday.

"We are disappointed and alarmed about the spill itself and the lack of communication from the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy," McMillan said in an email. "Despite past promises to be information partners, EGLE did not directly contact us about the spill. This inexcusable disregard for public safety put park users at risk."

Tribar employs around 70 workers at Plant 5 and roughly 400 in Wixom, Brown said. It has 58 injection-molding presses and \$130 million in sales, according to Plastics News estimates. The company has operated under several different names in recent years. Its listed as a portfolio company of Washington, DC-based HCI Equity Partners, which invested in 2015, according to its website.

Inquiries to HCI spokespeople were not returned Wednesday.

It is not known how long the PFAS chemicals were actually being discharged, however, because prior to 2018 there were no requirements for monitoring industrial discharge of the emerging pollutant, which has since been discovered to be more hazardous than previously thought and thus more strictly regulated.

In response to an order by the city of Wixom in 2018, the company installed a system to treat the discharged liquid for PFAS chemicals. Three years later, the company installed granular activated carbon filters in response to a PFAS violation from the state.

State officials said Wednesday that results from nine samples taken downstream from the chemical release would be ready Thursday. Results from two tests taken at Norton Creek and on the Huron River did not detect hexavalent chromium Wednesday, but officials said no conclusions can be drawn from that.

"The agency, in concert with partners from across the watershed, is developing a testing plan for coming days and weeks," EGLE said.

Until the extent of contamination is identified, residents and nearby parks and businesses are left waiting.

Bruce Heavner, owner of Heavner Canoe & Kayak Rental in Milford along the Huron River, said the business can continue operating despite the spill, though they have had to make adjustments to their routes.

"The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services and Michigan Department of Natural Resources said we can put trips starting in our location and going upstream and pedaling back to our location, but we can't do anything downstream because the drain that flows into the Huron River that was contaminated is downstream of us," owner Bruce Heavner said.

Heavner said the spill has already begun to impact business, as the business has had to alter the reservations of customers, and had to pick up customers who were mid-trip downriver.

"We're concerned about how this beautiful stretch of the river is being affected (with) all the wildlife and people not being able to go and enjoy it," Heavner said. "Unfortunately, our pocketbook is a side effect of that, but that's not our main concern."

In a statement on the business' website, Heavner Canoe and Kayak Rental said prolonged exposure to the contaminated area is the greatest risk, though customers who have been in the affected area should be safe if they take "a good shower."

"We have been in contact with the Village of Milford and the Proud Lake DNR, and we all feel that Wixom Road is the convenient and familiar boundary," the statement reads. "We all agree that upstream trips from our livery into Proud Lake Recreation Area should be unaffected. However, we are all waiting for confirmation from water tests to be sure."

Brown said the next step for Wixom will be to determine how to decontaminate its wastewater treatment plant — and keep Tribar on the hook for costs associated with it.

"We don't have an exact understanding of what we are faced with," he said.

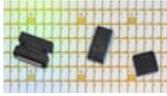
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